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ABSTRACT

"Autonomy" is an ambiguous term that can denote either the right of adults to manage their own affairs or their actual or potential ability to do so. These various senses of the word are regularly, and often indiscriminately, employed by adult educators. Personal autonomy is probably developed most effectively in a traditional kind of instructional situation, since people who initially lack the confidence or ability to undertake the management of their own education are likely to find the traditional situation a less threatening context in which to learn. A process of education that embodies the principles of individual choice, democratic control, rationality, and respect for persons in a realistic way can help adults to become more self-directing and more self-determining both in their thinking and in their behavior. However, there is very little scope for compulsion in adult education. Attendance is essentially voluntary and means of punishment or coercion generally do not exist. People who are not already autonomous and independent are unlikely to become so unless they feel they are learning in an environment where the process of personal change and its results will be accepted. Teachers seeking to promote the development of personal autonomy must be ready to challenge and provoke intellectually; to provide sympathetic emotional support; to provide additional educational help, such as basic study skills; and to consider the use of learning contracts. (A 58-item bibliography is included in the document.) (CML)

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Student autonomy in adult classes

John Hostler

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University of Manchester

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PREFACE

In my last publication in this series I showed that personal autonomy must be a central and fundamental value in any form of education which aims to treat people as adults (Hostler 1981 p56). It was not a very novel or startling claim even then, for adult educators in this country have long recognised that student autonomy should be a guiding principle in their work, and around that time other philosophers of adult education (e.g. Lawson pp14, 87) were demonstrating its importance too. Perhaps as a result, professional preoccupation with student autonomy has if anything increased since then, to such a point that Brookfield (1985 p20) now feels bound to warn that there is a danger of it dominating the theory and practice of adult education to the exclusion of all other values and principles.

But though concern for student autonomy is undoubtedly widespread, clear understanding of what it means is not. In talking to teachers of adults about their work I have found that many are rather hazy and some are quite mistaken about what student autonomy actually entails. There is a good deal of confusion between it and certain other ideas and there is also a worrying gap between theory and practice, in that efforts supposedly aimed at developing the personal autonomy of students sometimes lead to problems in the classroom and end in failure and frustration.

Accordingly there seems to be a need for a short essay to clarify the idea of autonomy in adult education and to discuss some of its practical implications for the teacher of an adult class. Many of the authors who have written about student autonomy (Dearden, for example, and Downie, Loudfoot & Telfer) have focused entirely on teaching children and young people, while those who have dealt with the education of adults (such as Paterson) have often been more concerned to define the idea of autonomy at a conceptual level than to prescribe in detail the means of developing it in students. This monograph therefore seeks not only to clarify the concept of student autonomy (in chapters 1, 2 and 3) but also to recommend structures and procedures for promoting it in adult education (in chapters 4 and 5); in addition it examines some of the difficulties likely to be encountered when these methods are employed in practice (in chapter 6) and discusses how they can be overcome (in chapter 7).

It is based not only on works of educational theory but also, to a large extent, on my own experience of teaching adult classes and of conducting staff development exercises with teachers of adults. There is a consequent bias (especially evident in the examples I have given) towards the traditional type

of adult evening class, since that is the educational situation with which I am most familiar. But I have sought continually to broaden the discussion so as to cover other situations as well, such as classes for young adults, classes leading to qualifications, and the like, and therefore most of it is relevant to teaching adults in all areas of further and higher education.

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May 1986

Chapter 1

WHAT AUTONOMY IS

"Autonomy" was originally a Greek word. It meant "making one's own laws" and was used chiefly in a political context to describe cities or states which governed themselves, in contrast to colonies or dependencies governed from elsewhere. It retains this meaning today, of course; for example when Britain's entry into the EEC was being considered there was much debate about whether our national autonomy (i.e., our right to govern ourselves) would be diminished. But the word is also used nowadays in a more personal sense to describe someone "governing themselves" as an individual human being – holding their own opinions, making their own decisions and generally managing their own affairs. In this sense, being an autonomous person means being independent and self-determining, "master of one's fate and captain of one's soul" (to paraphrase W E Henley). Its opposite is being dependent and passive, a mere puppet controlled by someone else.

This broad, general meaning encompasses a number of ambiguities. Personal autonomy may be thought of either as a *right* (in this sense, we speak of being "granted" it or "deprived" of it by others) or as an *ability* to exercise that right and to manage one's own affairs (as when a child is said to be "not yet" autonomous). Moreover that ability may be conceived as an *actual* competence in self-management (to be "exercised" or "enjoyed") or as one that is merely *potential* or latent (to be "enhanced" or "developed"). The last of these senses is especially common in talk about education, though the others are regularly employed also.

Some objections

But are any of these senses really meaningful? Objections are often levelled against the whole idea of personal autonomy, suggesting in effect that it is an empty fiction, a fanciful notion which has no application in the real world.

These objections can be grouped roughly into three main kinds. The first derives from the fact that every individual depends on society. Sociologists and psychologists alike have shown that each of us necessarily relies on our association with other people for both our mental and our physical well-being. From our relationships with others and from our membership of social groupings we derive a vital sense of personality and individual identity, as well

as our language and our fundamental beliefs, values and world-view. Consequently the notion that any one of us could make a truly independent decision is an absurdity: in order to conceive ourselves and our situation we use ideas which are generated and defined by others, and in order to act effectively we rely on conventions and institutions which are established and maintained by society. A second line of argument derives from psycho-analytic theory. Freud and his followers have made us recognise that much of our conscious behaviour is shaped by unconscious forces, many of which result from our very early experience. Therefore we can never be sure that we are really in command of ourselves in the way that the idea of autonomy seems to imply. I may think I am calmly and independently deciding some issue in my life (in my career, perhaps, or in a personal relationship) but in fact I may be motivated by jealousy of my father, say, or by some comparable emotion which is all the more powerful for being unconscious. The third kind of reason for doubting whether we can ever be truly autonomous derives from philosophical theories of determinism. These usually start from the premise that every event must have a cause. An uncaused event would simply be unintelligible, it is thought, for usually we come to understand an otherwise mysterious occurrence by finding out why it happened. Since human actions are events they must have causes too, and so in fact we commonly express our sense of understanding someone's behaviour as "seeing what makes them tick" – i.e., discerning the causes of their conduct. However, the reason why they behave as they do is at the same time a reason why they do not behave otherwise, for unless it explains why they perform this action rather than another it does not fully explain their conduct. That is why when we feel that we really understand someone's behaviour it often seems predictable or inevitable, "just what we expected". But if their actions can be predicted they appear not to be autonomous, for a person who really could not have done otherwise cannot properly be said to have chosen freely to act in the way they did.[1]

Considered all together, arguments such as these are so convincing that one cannot seriously doubt their shared conclusion: to be completely autonomous and independent of all external influences is indeed impossible. But no one would want to deny that anyway. As Dearden points out (p64), educators who try to develop autonomy are not aiming at absolute (and impossible) self-determination but merely at a measure of independence and personal self-management. And that is undoubtedly a feasible goal. When all due allowance is made for the effect of social conditioning, there remains a limited but still very significant area of individual choice and freedom which, as Perlman shows (p68ff), the helping professions generally try to enlarge. Though we are all influenced to a certain extent by unconscious motives, some of us are evidently more able than others to resist them, and indeed the technique of psycho-analysis has been developed in order to free us from their domination. And as Stalley comments (p100), all philosophical theories of determinism acknowledge a real practical difference between acting on one's own initiative

and being made to act by external forces, and thus in effect they admit the reality of "autonomy" in the everyday sense with which this study will be concerned.

All the objections reviewed above imply that no one can truly be said to be autonomous (in an absolute sense). A contrary argument is offered by Ragg (p66) who contends that *everyone* is autonomous. He draws a distinction between "acting" and merely "behaving", between doing things consciously and deliberately, on the one hand, and on the other, not really "doing" them at all but just moving unthinkingly (e.g. through instinct or automatism). He then points out that all action (in his sense) involves conscious decision and is to that extent "self-determined", and that therefore everyone who is not a mindless automaton is autonomous. Clearly this argument too threatens to deprive the idea of autonomy of all practical relevance; but once again, the threat is more apparent than real. For Ragg also admits the everyday practical difference between acting on one's own initiative and obeying someone else's commands – he just prefers to describe it as a difference in degree of "rationality" rather than "self-determination" (loc.cit.).

Although I shall not follow his usage here (preferring to treat rationality as a distinct notion – see chapter 2), his argument does serve as a useful reminder that the meaning of "autonomy" is vague and ambiguous and that many arguments about it come close to being purely verbal disputes. As already indicated, I shall use the term throughout this work in a very familiar, everyday sense, to denote behaviour which involves making up your own mind rather than having to accept what you are told, deciding and choosing for yourself instead of just obeying orders, and carrying out your own plans and projects rather than being directed or controlled by someone else.

A preliminary analysis

Despite theoretical objections, therefore, autonomy remains a real, familiar and important notion. Though simply described it is not always so easily understood, and in fact the next two chapters will be occupied in making its meaning completely clear. But a start can be made here by sketching briefly three other ideas which seem to be comprised within it.

First, autonomy evidently has much to do with the exercise of choice. I show that I am a self-directing being by *choosing* – not just selecting (which can be done mindlessly), but selecting deliberately and with due thought. Thus, as Dearden observes (p71), personal autonomy is manifested and experienced daily in a wide range of mental activities like "choosing, deciding, deliberating, reflecting, planning and judging". Second, when I choose deliberately I am conscious that it is really *I* who am choosing. I acknowledge my choice as being "in character", or what some writers call "authentic": it reveals what Kaufman (p48) calls my "core" self, i.e. "that constellation of relatively deeply rooted, important dispositions, knowledge of which helps us

to anticipate and explain [a person's] actions over a relatively extended stretch of his total behaviour". If *per contra* it expresses only a passing mood or a passion which has temporarily gripped me I will be inclined to disown it as my choice and to deny that it was a truly autonomous act. And third, the choice must be capable of being justified or defended by reasons which I accept as true. After all , I could be choosing "authentically" if I were just following a prevailing fashion or were acting from habit: I would still have to acknowledge it as my own deliberate choice, albeit one made in a rather unreflective way. I can only claim that it is fully autonomous if I not only do the choosing but also do it because I have really thought through the issue and have made a rational, considered decision.

Gewirth (p41) rightly points out that this very strong link between the concept of autonomy and the ideal of rational and deliberate behaviour is one reason why "autonomous" is generally used as a term of approbation. Some other reasons will be examined in chapter 3, but in order to clarify its meaning further the next chapter will first consider some other ideas which are often associated and sometimes confused with it.

Chapter 2

SOME RELATED IDEAS

One might be surprised that the idea of autonomy should have attracted so much attention from theorists of adult education. After all, as outlined so far it is a simple and familiar notion: why should it be deemed so important? The answer is to be found not so much in the idea of autonomy itself as in its close logical relationships with many other important concepts. This chapter will consider several of these briefly in order to show how they affect our understanding of what personal autonomy implies.

Freedom

Evidently personal autonomy presupposes freedom in some sense, for you cannot be directing yourself if you are obliged to do whatever other people want. But like autonomy itself, freedom is a vague and ambiguous notion which, according to Berlin (p121), has "more than two hundred senses". Thanks in part to his own lucid discussion of them, two in particular have become prominent in social philosophy, and I will concentrate on these here.[2]

The first is usually called "negative" liberty. A person is said to be "free" in this sense when they are not being interfered with by others – when they are not being threatened or coerced, for example, or otherwise prevented from doing what they want. The most obvious kind of coercion is intimidation by physical violence. A person held to ransom by kidnappers or a victim with a gun at his head is probably the clearest instance of someone deprived of this kind of freedom, and therefore robbed of their autonomy as well. But Berlin (p122) points out that political structures or social arrangements can also deny freedom and autonomy in less obvious ways, for if people are deliberately kept in a state of poverty or ignorance they can be prevented from achieving their wishes as surely as by more overt physical means.

Thus negative freedom can be thought of as rather like a space within which you can do what you like without being obstructed or hindered by obstacles deliberately imposed by others. Obviously it is needed for the exercise of personal autonomy, as the foregoing examples show; but equally it does not suffice by itself to ensure that your actions are autonomous since you can evidently be "free" in this sense without thereby directing yourself. You may be in the grip of some strong emotion, for instance, or at the mercy of doubts

and fears: no one else is controlling you, to be sure, but neither are you really in control of yourself. In such a situation you can properly be said to be "*not* free" also, in a distinct, second sense known as "positive" freedom. It too is called "freedom" because it denotes a kind of space within which a person can act without hindrance, but it focuses on the fact that the "barriers" which restrict people are often internal obstacles like fear, ignorance, apathy or depression, rather than the external constraints of physical force.

Whereas "negative" liberty is merely required in order to exercise autonomy, possessing "positive" freedom is virtually the same as being autonomous, for it means being able to direct your behaviour rationally, unhindered by emotion or prejudice, which is the common notion of personal autonomy sketched in chapter 1.[1] So the former of these two kinds of freedom is a necessary condition of autonomy while the latter is both necessary and sufficient. That is why it is the latter which is usually the main concern of educators, as well as of many social and political theorists too. When they speak of "freedom" or "liberation" they commonly mean rather more than removing legal or economic barriers to action (though that may be envisaged). Their ultimate goal is "positive" liberty, a situation or state of being in which people are able to live as autonomous individuals, fully in control of themselves and their own affairs.

Democracy

The words "free" and "democratic" are used so much in conjunction with each other that they may appear to mean almost the same thing. But in fact only "positive" liberty should be associated with democracy in this way. As explained above, it implies being genuinely in control of oneself, unhindered by internal obstacles such as passion or prejudice. The desire to be "free" in this sense is the moral basis of the claim to be given a say in political decisions, since you cannot feel that you are really in control of your own life unless you can exercise some influence at least over decisions of the community which are likely to affect you. For this reason you can best achieve full personal autonomy as a member of a group which manages its own affairs in a democratic way – a point which has profound implications for adult education, as will be explained in chapter 5. In contrast, the logical connection between democracy and "negative" liberty is very much weaker. In theory at least, you could live largely unhindered by external interference within a political system which denied its citizens any voice in corporate decision-making. Berlin (p129, note) cites the regime of Frederick the Great as an example, for although it was constitutionally autocratic it nevertheless allowed a considerable measure of (negative) liberty to certain groups of its subjects at least.

But though "positive" liberty and personal autonomy evidently have to be exercised in a democratic context, this argument does not strictly imply anything further about what kind of democratic political structure is required.

So long as you can influence collective decisions which affect you it does not matter, so far as the concept of autonomy is concerned, whether this is achieved by secret ballot, informal consultation, electing representatives or by some other means.

Responsibility

"Free" and "responsible" are another pair of terms often used together, and once again, since both are ambiguous, the relationship between them needs to be defined carefully. Consider first "responsibility" in the sense of being responsible (or "answerable") for your actions. Evidently a person is not responsible in this sense if they are not "negatively" free. If they are being forced to act by an armed thug, for instance, they cannot be held accountable for what they are being made to do. But even if they are free of all external compulsion they still may not be fully responsible in this sense, for they may be acting in ignorance of what they are doing or while somehow not fully in control of themselves, and these too are factors which may suffice to exculpate them. Consequently they cannot be counted fully answerable for their deeds unless they are free in the "positive" sense also. But an autonomous person, who acts deliberately and rationally, is inescapably responsible for their own conduct.

There is also another sense of "responsibility" in which we speak of "responsible (or irresponsible) behaviour". This describes the conduct of someone who is acting with due attention to all their duties and obligations (or "responsibilities"). The link between personal autonomy and this sense of responsibility is much weaker. Admittedly Moran (e.g. p31) argues that someone who is really autonomous will find their personal fulfilment through assuming and discharging responsibilities toward others, but his reasoning relies heavily on a notion of personal maturity which rather goes beyond the concept of autonomy, as will be shown later in this chapter. The notion of directing oneself and being in control of one's own actions does not by itself imply anything about undertaking commitments towards others.

Reason

In fact almost the only thing that the concept of autonomy does imply about the intention and motive of conduct is that they must be rational, since it rules out actions done in the grip of emotion, ignorance and the like, as was explained in chapter 1. But rationality is another ambiguous notion and several senses of it are involved here. One of them, explained in detail by Hampshire, springs from the fact that in order to be said to be "doing" something I must have some consciousness of myself as the one who does it. I must be rational to the minimal extent of knowing what I am doing and knowing that I am doing it. If I lack even that level of self-awareness (while sleepwalking, for instance, or "tripping out" on drugs) the action which my body performs is not really "done" by me. A closely related idea of rationality has to do with anticipating the consequences of my deed. If I cannot foresee

the likely outcome of my behaviour I cannot properly be said to "know what I am doing", as evidenced by a very young child who plays with matches and starts a major fire.

It is important to note that "reason" is being used here in a sense which has little to do with intelligence or cleverness and still less with sagacity or wisdom. Rather, it denotes attributes like consciousness, understanding and self-control, which are much more widely shared and are acquired earlier: according to one tradition the "age of reason" (in this sense) is around fourteen years. Whenever it is reached, it is the age at which the individual is capable of acting rationally and hence autonomously – but not necessarily wisely. To guard against another misleading association one should note also that this sense of being "rational" has no connotation of being unemotional, cold or calculating. Being autonomous does not mean being a machine. On the contrary, insofar as it involves being a person it necessarily includes experiencing emotion, which itself is really a manifestation of rationality. As Downie & Telfer observe (1969, p22), "the ability to feel and express a wide range of sustained emotions is characteristically human, and it involves the perception and discrimination which only reason can supply".

Besides these important functions of consciousness, self-control and foresight, autonomy in the fullest sense implies also a rational choice of aims and purposes in life. This perhaps is a less common attribute. After all it is quite possible to work out how to achieve one's goals without pausing to ask whether they are worth achieving, yet the failure to do so is ultimately a failure in rationality. As Paterson says (p119), "a man who relies for his opinions on others whom he blindly trusts is a man who makes no attempt to scan evidence, draw distinctions, make comparisons, examine assumptions, trace implications – in short, he is a man who makes no attempt to think, beyond the minimum amount of thinking needed to understand the opinions which he holds." Insofar as people tend to take individual and social goals as "given", perhaps accepting them unconsciously from parents, teachers, or the prevailing code of values, they are surely being less than fully rational, and therefore to that extent not wholly autonomous. To be really self-directing is not just to follow a path prescribed by others but also to choose it for oneself.

Education

The use of reason, especially in ways such as the last of those mentioned above, has been regarded by many philosophers as the hallmark which distinguishes true education from mere indoctrination. Admittedly there is a continuing debate about the nature of this distinction and some theorists favour another criterion (the content of what is taught, for instance). But a common "mainstream" view is that while indoctrination aims to win assent by any means, including threats, "brainwashing" and the like, education restricts itself to rational arguments, since "not conviction by itself, but justified conviction, rational assent, is the aim" (Atkinson p56). So it is

commonly held that an educator should try to make people reflective and critical, taking nothing on trust and really thinking for themselves. To do this is evidently to go a long way towards making them autonomous as well, and accordingly Hare (p70), in a revealing analogy which reminds one of the term's etymology, likens the true educator to the governor of a colony who wants to help his/her "subjects" to achieve political independence and therefore seeks to develop their powers of self-government. For him and for many others, the central, overriding goal of all education is the development of personal autonomy.

Maturity and Adulthood

Since the capacity for autonomous behaviour develops during childhood and adolescence and is deliberately fostered in the course of one's schooling it naturally has close conceptual links also with the notion of "being grown up" and mature. Some theorists indeed treat it as the very essence of maturity. Knowles (1973, p45), for example, declares that "the point at which an individual achieves a self-concept of essential self-direction is the point at which he psychologically becomes adult". But this is to overstate the case. We all accept, surely, that people can and should be "adult" in other ways besides self-direction: in sensitivity and tact, for instance, in wisdom and insight, in emotional depth, moral judgment and personal commitment.

Yet even if autonomy is only one element in being adult it is undeniably a very important one for several reasons. The terms "adult" and "mature" (which I am treating as more or less synonymous), like most of those discussed in this chapter, have a complex set of meanings. In the first place they are evaluative. No single set of personal characteristics qualifies as the universal and objective pattern of adulthood. As I have argued more fully elsewhere (Hostler 1981, p27), each culture has its own beliefs about what mature people should be like, and those beliefs change continually. To designate particular attributes or behaviours as "adult" is therefore to commend them, to say that these rather than some others should be aimed at in personal development. At present, in our society, personal autonomy is widely accepted as one of the most significant characteristics of maturity; but it has not always been so, and of course there are many other cultures today in which attributes like obedience and conformity are valued much more than self-direction and independence.

In the second place, "adult" or "mature" can be used either to attribute certain characteristics to a person or to accord a particular status to them. The status of being an adult carries with it a wide range of legal and moral rights and duties, chief among which are a fundamental obligation to share in the tasks and responsibilities of society, together with a right to share in its decisions, a right to consult with others, a right to ignore advice, and so on (see Paterson p6ff. for more). The characteristics of adulthood are supposed somehow to correspond to these: the legal right to vote, for instance, is granted by our society to those presumed (in virtue of their age) to be able to

exercise it sensibly. But as that example suggests, people who have the status of adults do not always possess the corresponding attributes. Many who are adult in years and in law sometimes think and behave in ways which are far from being adult in character. Thus the term "adult" is ambiguous in exactly the same way as "autonomy" itself, which was shown at the outset of this study to denote either a right or an ability. The right of self-direction is one of the most fundamental of those accorded by our society in granting someone the status of adulthood (the absence of it distinguishes the legal "minor", for example), but the ability to exercise that right sensibly may be lacking or limited, as remarked above. In chapters 4 and 5 it will be seen that this ambiguity is crucial for the definition and practice of adult education.

Self-awareness and self-knowledge

At the end of chapter 1 it was shown that autonomous action is "authentic" in the sense of being done by the real "me". These ideas of authenticity and autonomy are also connected in several ways. One is by means of the notion of self-knowledge. As Barrow points out (p134), understanding oneself is an essential ingredient in behaving rationally, for my conduct must be counted absurd or unreasonable unless it bears a conscious relation to the truth of things as I know them, and that of course includes the truth about myself. Thus if I continually cherish ambitions which are manifestly beyond my powers (not just dreaming about them, but fruitlessly pursuing them) I am being irrational as well as immature, perhaps. Now self-knowledge can be gained in several ways: from comments or criticisms made by others, for example; from the study of subjects like history and literature, as Paterson explains (p142); but also from acting autonomously myself. In choosing a goal, planning to attain it and then working towards it there are endless occasions for discovering my abilities and limitations, as well as for finding out my real goals and concerns.[4]

Besides self-knowledge, autonomy also gives rise to a more fundamental kind of self-awareness. As Bradley shows (Essay 1), I become conscious of myself as a "self" mainly through the exercise of will. In deciding, choosing and acting I become aware that I am an individual entity, able to act upon the world and therefore distinct from it. This sense of being a separate agent gives rise to a kind of "self-respect" – not self-esteem or self-approbation, but a more basic and pervasive consciousness that one is "a person" (whether good or bad). Williams describes it (p163) as a valued sense of being a creature capable of initiating events and making things happen, rather than being merely "the instrument of another's will".

Respect for persons

Thus the idea of autonomy is linked also with that of respecting someone as a person. This notion has come to be very widely accepted as a guiding principle in all the helping professions. It is somewhat vague, admittedly, and different theorists interpret it in rather different ways, but the majority would probably

agree with the analysis of Downie & Telfer (1969, p15), that "to respect a person ... is to respect him for those features which make him what he is as a person and which, when developed, constitute his flourishing". In other words it is not to respect him for his peculiar achievements or abilities – for being *him*, so to speak – but simply for being a human person.

What the features are which make him a person is to some extent an open question. I explained earlier that they vary from one culture to another and that in ours they include pre-eminently the attribute of being a self-directing agent. For us, therefore, the principle of "respect for persons" means that we must be concerned above all to preserve and enhance people's autonomy, albeit along with many other attributes of human personality. Plant (p12) explains that in practice this means allowing and encouraging people to run their own lives as far as possible instead of making all the key decisions for them, and though his remarks concern the practice of social work they are evidently applicable to education too.

Equality

The principle of respect for persons, itself relying on the notion of autonomy, supports in turn the even more fundamental principle of the equality of all human beings. As a political and ethical slogan this sometimes encounters the objection that people are manifestly *not* equal, that some are cleverer or more talented or stronger than others – and of course we do differ very much in these respects.[5] But being equal does not necessarily mean being alike; rather, it means having the same status and degree of importance despite the differences between us. Because of this, our belief in equality depends very much on the idea of autonomy, since essentially it amounts to the conviction that "all ... have the same status as choosers and creators of value", as Wilson puts it (p208). All are presumed capable of self-direction towards their chosen goals, and therefore all are to be accorded equal (negative) liberty for self-expression, equal access to the means of self-development, and so on.

Thus one can see that the idea of autonomy, though relatively simple in itself, is at the very centre of a large family of important and cherished concepts. It is linked with freedom, democracy and equality, and so informs political and social thought; with responsibility, self-knowledge and respect for persons, through which it influences moral and ethical thinking; and with reason and adulthood too, whence it has come to dominate the theory of education in general and of adult education in particular.

Chapter 3

WHY AUTONOMY MATTERS

The previous chapter has revealed how autonomy is associated with many other things considered important and desirable but little has been said so far about why it should be valued in its own right. As indicated already, although its worth is usually taken for granted in our culture there are many other societies in which it is viewed with misgiving or suspicion. This chapter will consider why we prize it so highly and will show that there are several reasons for doing so, not all of them equally sound.

Self-realisation

One popular argument contends that autonomy is necessary for personal growth. It was suggested in chapter 2 that conscious self-direction enhances self-knowledge and self-understanding, and these are evidently essential for self-realisation; so it is often claimed that people will only develop into mature, sensible individuals if they are allowed to run their own lives. For instance Biestek (p20) asserts that "the exercise of responsibility is one of the principal sources of personality growth and maturity ... Social workers can give abundant testimony from long experience of the futility of casework when plans are superimposed upon the client. Social responsibility, emotional adjustment, and personality development are possible only when the person exercises his freedom of choice and decision." Although he is writing about social work, many would accept that his remarks apply equally to the other helping professions and to adult education as well.

Popular though it is, this view depends on some questionable assumptions. For instance it evidently presumes that there is an inbuilt dynamic towards personal growth which will become manifest if people are allowed to direct themselves freely. Now there is indeed a good deal of evidence to support this, as Shaw shows in his review of theories of self-realisation. But the notion of personal "growth" or "development" which is central to them all is ambiguous in a crucial way. As Lawson explains (p97), it can denote either a process of natural *change*, as when we speak of children's "physical development", or one of *improvement*, as in talk of their "growing maturity". Evidently these two senses, one descriptive and the other evaluative, are logically quite distinct, and therefore it does not follow that the changes which occur when people are granted autonomy will necessarily be the sort of

"developments" which are socially acceptable or are approved by others. They may include increasing wilfulness or selfishness, for instance. In the passage quoted above Biestek mentions "social responsibility" as something which will develop when people are allowed to direct themselves, but in chapter 2 it was shown that undertaking obligations and commitments to other people is in fact quite a different matter from taking charge of one's own life.[6]

The other doubtful point is whether it is really true that "only through the exercise of responsibility in free decisions can the client strive toward the maturity of his personality, intellectually, socially, emotionally and spiritually", as Biestek claims (loc.cit.). As evidence he cites the extensive experience of social workers, which of course cannot be denied; but neither can one deny evidence from other sources which indicates that these same aspects of personal maturity may develop equally in situations where (negative) freedom is largely absent. Downie & Telfer (1969, p58) point out that Scottish Calvinism at one time imposed rigid and pervasive constraints on people and yet produced "a period of fierce individualism and independence", and one thinks of Jesuits who likewise are brought up in strict obedience to uniform principles but who (at least those I know) are nevertheless mature people of ample intellectual and spiritual development. Biestek appears to have confused two things carefully distinguished by Dearden (p61),viz., the conditions necessary to exercise autonomy and those required to develop it. It is true that one cannot be autonomous without being (negatively) free, rational, self-aware and so on, but one can become those things without being autonomous, and therefore this link with personal development is only a relatively weak argument for the value of autonomy.

Social progress

Personal autonomy is often claimed to be necessary not only for the development of individual personality but also for the progress and improvement of society. An eminent proponent of this view was J S Mill, much of whose classic essay "On Liberty" is an argument for it. In chapter two, for instance, he maintains that preventing people from thinking for themselves will inevitably hinder intellectual advance and scientific discovery, while in chapter three he likewise contends that great social benefits will follow from allowing people to put their thinking into practice and living as they wish (subject only to the condition that they do not harm others in doing so). "As it is useful that while mankind are imperfect there should be different opinions, so it is that there should be different experiments of living" (Mill 1974, p120).

The basis of these arguments is the premise that no person or group is infallible (op.cit., p77). Like many liberals before and since, Mill was very conscious of the extent of human ignorance and the consequent likelihood of error. He held that no one could legitimately be sure of being right beyond all

possibility of doubt and that therefore the wisest policy is to allow rival beliefs and different practices to flourish side by side, hoping that in the long run experience will show where truth and efficacy lie. Thus his argument favours a tolerant, pluralist society within which individualism and personal autonomy are prized.

This is an attractive line of reasoning, but once again its basic assumptions are open to question. Is it really true that one can never be sure of being right? Surely there are many occasions when experience proves beyond all doubt that a belief is mistaken or a policy ineffective and inappropriate. Mill himself evidently assumes that one can identify and often predict in a reasonably objective way what will be harmful to other people, for not only questions of fact but also issues of benefit and advantage can be settled beyond all reasonable doubt. At a deeper level his argument ignores the importance of "praxis", the interaction between reality and ideas. He evidently assumes that the world exists independently of our beliefs and that it forms a kind of standard by which they can be tested: they are true if it is actually as they represent it, false if not. But many philosophers today would question that model and would argue that what we acknowledge to be "real" is in fact largely determined by our prior, unconscious beliefs about how reality must be.

Pleasure

These arguments of Biestek and Mill are both "instrumental" justifications – i.e., they both try to show that autonomy is to be valued as a means to something else, such as personal growth or social progress. Other theorists have sought to offer "intrinsic" justifications which show that it is valuable in and for itself. For instance Dearden (p70) remarks that exercising one's autonomy is inherently pleasant. Doing things for oneself, forming and executing one's own plans and projects, can indeed be a very satisfying experience. As explained in chapter 2, it contributes greatly to a sense of self-esteem and personal worth which contrasts sharply with the humiliation and indignity often felt by those who (through illness, perhaps, or disability) cannot be autonomous.

Although this is quite true it fails for two reasons to prove the value of autonomy. First, only some people really enjoy being autonomous. There are many who do not, largely because it means being responsible as well, as was also explained in the previous chapter. They do not want to be answerable for their actions, to have to defend their behaviour, justify their choices and stand by the consequences; in many matters at least, they would rather obey orders, off-loading the responsibility and letting someone else take the blame. This "fear of freedom" is in fact so common that it has been the subject of a classic study by Fromm, which obliges one to doubt whether the exercise of autonomy is really as enjoyable as Dearden suggests. Second, even if it were its value would still be open to question. The mere fact that something is

generally liked or wanted does not prove that it is good or valuable. Experience testifies to the fact that we often want things which are harmful or comparatively worthless; and, as G E Moore points out (p67), what *is* desired and what *ought to be* desired are logically distinct ideas, even though ones which are frequently confused.

Morality

Historically, it was chiefly Immanuel Kant, writing in the 18th century, who introduced the modern concept of personal autonomy into Western philosophy. He sought an objective foundation for judgments of moral right and wrong and thought he had found one in the notion of morality itself. He argued that what makes an act morally good is the fact that it is done from a sense of duty. He analysed this as meaning that the agent voluntarily imposes a rule of conduct upon himself. Thus his basic idea was that when we act morally we are regulating our behaviour by rules or "laws" which we prescribe to ourselves, and this moral self-legislation he called "autonomy" (Kant p98).

His use of the word is etymologically correct, of course, but its special place in his rather complex and abstruse system of ethics gives it a rather more limited meaning than it has elsewhere in this monograph.[7] The autonomy of adult students is to be understood primarily in terms of familiar, everyday notions like "thinking for oneself" and "managing one's own affairs" which Kant would have dismissed as commonplace functions of practical reasoning. In his philosophy autonomy has to do exclusively with *moral* thought and practice: it denotes a specialised ability to regulate one's actions by self-imposed rules which are seen to be valid for all rational agents. He thought that this ability is a distinctive characteristic of human beings and that possessing it is what makes one "a person" (which also is a semi-technical term in his philosophy). As the *sine qua non* of all morality it is incomparably precious and is the main reason why "persons" are themselves to be treated as important and valuable (Kant p96ff).

Out of his reasoning on these topics has come much of our modern belief in "respect for persons" which, as shown in chapter 2, is closely linked with our idea of autonomy. And though what we commonly mean by "autonomy" is much broader than Kant's sense of the word, some philosophers today still seek to justify it in the same way. For example, Downie & Telfer (1969 p21) offer a summary of his argument in order to show that what they call "the ability to be self-determining" is the ultimate value underlying all morality and respect for persons. Up to a point they are right, of course; where they fall short of his achievement is in not pursuing the deeper question of what *kind* of "self-determination" is the basis of morality.

Nevertheless they do demonstrate that self-determination is a necessary if not a sufficient condition of moral worth,which means that autonomy has at least

a degree of intrinsic value. One weakness of "extrinsic" justifications (as offered by Biestek and Mill) is that the value of what is justified as a means depends on the value of the end, with the consequence that autonomy can thus be shown to be only as desirable as its results. In contrast Downie & Telfer show that it is to be preserved and enhanced for its own sake, no matter what its consequences. This is important because, as suggested earlier, those consequences may well be unwelcome. When people acquire a sense of personal autonomy they become more independent and begin to develop their own goals and plans which may conflict with ours; they become less docile and more difficult to manage; they have to be persuaded, not commanded, taken account of and not ignored. As Dearden remarks (p74), an approach to education which recognises people's autonomy therefore demands much more of the teacher and may well be less "efficient" (in terms of getting quick results) than one which merely requires the pupils to do what they are told. Nevertheless it is clearly to be preferred on purely moral grounds.

Human status

Powerful as the Kantian argument is, it is evidently limited to justifying "autonomy" in a rather narrow sense. Is there any way to establish the value of our somewhat broader concept? One strategy is simply to assert it as self-evident. Mill does this: besides arguing that individual autonomy benefits society he also (rather confusingly) maintains that it is intrinsically valuable simply because it is an integral aspect of being human. "He who lets the world, or his own portion of it, choose his plan of life for him has no need of any other faculty than the ape-like [i.e., sub-human] one of imitation", he declares, whereas the person who chooses it for himself has "more comparative worth as a human being" (Mill 1974 p123); and he goes on in a rather prophetic passage to say that even if we could build "automatons" to perform most human functions more efficiently than human beings, using them instead of people would be "a considerable loss" to the world (loc.cit.). Essentially his claim here is that people just are valuable in themselves, largely because of their ability to be autonomous.

In making assertions like these, instead of developing arguments, Mill is not necessarily being arbitrary or unreasonable. As he himself remarked in another work, "questions of ultimate ends are not amenable to direct proof" (Mill 1962 p254). Every enquiry has to start somewhere: in every scheme of thought some things have to be taken for granted, as first principles on which the rest depend; likewise in every code of values some have to be acknowledged as primary or fundamental and not implied by others. So it is not necessarily illogical just to assert that autonomy is one of these basic values.[8] Moreover it is quite plausible to do so since, as Dearden observes (p71), institutions and practices are very often justified by showing that they help to promote personal autonomy, while it would seem odd to try and defend autonomy by reference to them.

But Mill (op.cit. p255) went on to remark that even if one cannot strictly *prove* that assertions about "ultimate ends" are true one can and should give reasons to show that they are sensible. And although it is not impossible to do so in the present case, the fact is that most of the considerations which are usually proffered in favour of autonomy do not actually go to support its claim to be a fundamental value. As Bernstein shows, most theorists today believe in the primacy of personal development instead: they think that being a mature and fully human person is ultimately the most important thing, and they assert the value of autonomy as only one element within that wider concept. So although personal autonomy is often claimed to be intrinsically valuable its value is not usually thought to be supreme. Other aspects of being human are held to be important also, and sometimes it may need to be subordinated to them in order to achieve the greater goal of overall personal development.

Chapter 4

IMPLICATIONS FOR ADULT EDUCATION

So far in this essay there has been comparatively little mention of adult education. It seemed desirable to start by clarifying fully the idea of autonomy, since although it is a relatively simple concept in itself it is frequently confused with other more complicated notions, as was shown in chapter 2, and it is moreover generally believed to represent something intrinsically valuable even though the grounds for that belief are questionable, as chapter 3 has demonstrated. But now it is appropriate to begin a more detailed discussion of adult education, asking in particular how adults should be educated so as to respect and enhance their personal autonomy. This chapter will consider the question in relation to the outward form of adult education, the ways in which students' learning can be promoted and organised, while the next will discuss its implications for method and approach in teaching adults. The division between these topics is of course artificial and unrealistic since they are (or should be) intimately connected, but it may help to add clarity to this discussion.

In chapter 2 it was noted that many theorists virtually equate the terms "adult" and "autonomous". This is one main reason why adult education is naturally and very widely conceived as a process of educating autonomous individuals. But at the outset of this work it was shown also that "autonomy" is an ambiguous term which can denote either the right of adults to manage their own affairs or their actual or potential ability to do so. All these senses of the word are regularly (and often indiscriminately) employed by adult educators, with the consequence that they tend to see their work as encompassing a bewilderingly wide range of different kinds of educational activity.

Independent learning

At one end of the scale is their growing interest in independent learning by adults. This has been studied a good deal by researchers such as Tough and Brookfield, who have found that very large numbers of adults undertake schemes of learning on their own initiative and under their own direction. Many of these schemes are very limited in scope, of course, and involve little more than finding out some necessary information or mastering a relatively simple skill; but many others too are extensive and significant endeavours,

often undertaken as serious, long-term hobbies and sometimes resulting in the learner becoming an acknowledged expert in his or her particular field of interest.

Whatever their scope all such ventures certainly deserve to be described as "autonomous" learning, in that they bear witness to powers of self-direction and independence which are often quite remarkable. But one should note that the word is being used in this context to denote an ability which is already fairly well developed. These "independent learners" are evidently people who are already capable of managing their own learning to a large extent; they are reasonably competent at studying and are not frightened of undertaking at least modest schemes of research. As Brookfield discovered (1985 p24), most of them are white and middle-class, the sort of people who have achieved a fair measure of success in their earlier educational career and are therefore confident of their own intellectual abilities. Consequently this phenomenon of independent learning has more to do with *exercising* autonomy than with *acquiring* it. Adult educators have become increasingly conscious of it in recent years and are generally willing to encourage it as far as they can, but since they are usually concerned primarily with helping people to *develop* their abilities, most of them tend not to regard it as the central focus of their work.

Study circles

Brookfield (1981 p21) also found that most long-term independent learners were glad of opportunities to meet others who shared their interests in order to swap ideas, information, hints and so on. Many of them therefore are prominent members of clubs, societies, enthusiasts' groups and the like. Conceptually it is but a short step from one of these gatherings to "a study circle" – i.e., a group of people who meet regularly in order to learn together rather than studying in isolation.

As developed in some Nordic countries the study circle system has become a nationwide organisation, comprising a multitude of registered groups of students who work through professionally-written, centrally-produced study materials. It is an excellent and in many ways impressive institution, but one should not be so dazzled by it as to forget that study circles can exist and flourish without any such elaborate organization. I know of one, for instance, which is just a group of friends who meet informally from time to time to discuss a book they have all read beforehand. A less casual version of this kind of meeting is possible through the auspices of the "University of the Third Age" (U3A), a body which seeks to bring together older people (often retired) who want to share their interests and their learning. In this country at least it does not attempt to prescribe or control their studies (Morris p138). Instead it functions like a kind of "learning exchange", merely enabling people who want to learn about a particular topic to meet with others who are willing to teach it, and helping them to meet regularly and study together.

Obviously this form of adult education differs from independent learning in that its focus is on groups rather than on individuals. But it puts much the same emphasis on individual autonomy, both in allowing students a free choice of subject and in expecting them to direct their own learning. Perhaps for this reason, it too appeals chiefly to people who are already fairly autonomous and competent at studying. Morris (loc.cit.) points out that U3A has so far succeeded best in Cambridge which, as she remarks, is a rather unusual environment from an educational point of view, being a city with a comparatively high proportion of intellectually able and informed people among its older inhabitants. Conversely, the Nordic study circle organisations have generally found that where the members of student groups are drawn from a more normal population it is actually quite difficult for groups to sustain genuinely autonomous, self-directed learning for any length of time.[9]

Distance learning

In complete contrast to versions of the study circle, all of which bring students together but let them study what they like, there are many other forms of adult education which prescribe the course of learning much more rigidly and expect students to work through it largely in solitude. Familiar examples are correspondence courses and similar "distance learning" packages in which a student works alone with materials supplied from afar; also courses offered by the Open University and "external" courses at other universities and colleges, most of which combine a large amount of private study with occasional periods of face-to-face group teaching. A variant on these is the Flexistudy scheme recently introduced in some colleges, which gives the student access to the institution's academic resources and also provides him or her with a limited amount of individual tuition.

These forms of adult education all appear to allow students much less personal autonomy than those previously considered, since in most of them the course syllabus is completely determined by other people. Moreover the materials for study are often presented in a rather didactic style, and they usually include set exercises, self-assessment questions and the like. Formal examinations too are regularly involved. Thus there is comparatively little freedom for the student to choose the actual content of the course.[10] On the other hand there is usually a great deal of room for flexibility in the processes of learning, for by and large the time, place, method and pace of studying are all left for the student to decide. And some adult educators contend that in the long run this is the more important factor. For instance M G Moore (1972 p84) claims that "proximity of students to teachers" inevitably fosters "habits of learner dependency" and accordingly maintains that distance teaching methods help students to become more autonomous by forcing them to make many crucial decisions for themselves.

There is surely some truth in this claim, but at the same time one must acknowledge that most of these forms of adult education presume at least a

measure of personal autonomy to start with. After all, they present the intending student with a series of possibly fearsome challenges. To reorganise one's life so as to make time for serious study; to work through the whole course conscientiously, including those parts of it one finds less than fascinating; to wrestle with confusions and difficulties by oneself: these are tasks which demand a level of confidence and self-management which many people believe (or discover) that they do not possess. In fact Moore (op.cit. p86) admits that even the most able students on distance learning programmes often need (face to face?) coaching in study techniques, and the Open University likewise offers an excellent preparatory course to help students develop skills of managing their own learning which they will need to cope with its demands. Like those considered earlier, therefore, these forms of adult education too usually presuppose a fair degree of autonomy in their students, and aim to exercise it at least as much as to develop it further.

Adult classes

It may seem paradoxical that the vast majority of adult education is still conducted by the traditional means of an "adult class" in which a group of students is taught together in a classroom by a teacher, for in the context of the present brief survey this must appear a means of tuition which is especially unsuited either to recognise or to develop the personal autonomy of adult learners. Outwardly at least, it seems to be a situation in which they are entirely at the mercy of their teacher. They neither determine the subject and the syllabus nor do they control the occasion, style and pace of learning: all these matters are usually decided beforehand by the professional educator, into whose hands they apparently entrust the course of their development.

Whether these apparent shortcomings are real, and if so, what can be done to remedy them, will be the main subjects of the remainder of this essay. But first it is worth considering briefly why adult educators should go on working in traditional ways which thus appear to deny student autonomy. Why do they not invest their energies instead in more innovative and attractive forms of adult education like those reviewed so far?

Well, many of them do, of course. Interest in such alternatives is widespread and is increasing, and similar new ventures are being started all the time. But there are at least three fundamental reasons why most teachers of adults continue along more or less traditional lines. One is that the institutions, structures and regulations within which they work have been developed over many years to facilitate the provision of adult classes, with the unintended result that they now permit the provision of very little else. In my own Extra-Mural Department, for example, a scheme to provide individual students with facilities and support for independent study was frustrated partly by the fact that we receive financial aid only toward the cost of teaching "classes" and "courses".[11] So too Fordham *et al.* (ch.9) discovered that established administrative boundaries between institutions tend more generally to

prevent new and progressive forms of adult education from being introduced. A second, more cogent reason is that a great many popular subjects are not easily taught by distance methods or by private study. To master them properly the student must come together with a teacher and preferably with other students as well. Most practical skills fall into this category, for they are learnt best by seeing them demonstrated and then by practising them under the continual guidance and correction of an expert. Many more academic subjects also demand face to face, group tuition, like philosophy, literary criticism, engineering or botany: if the student is to become proficient *in* these disciplines (and not merely acquire "book-learning" *about* them) active participation in discussion, exercises and projects is essential.

The third reason why adult classes retain their popularity has been hinted at already from time to time. All the other forms of adult education reviewed in this chapter *presuppose* a measure of personal autonomy. So, as suggested above, people who are not already independent to a large extent and who are not confident of their ability to learn by themselves are not very likely to be attracted by the prospect of learning through study circles, correspondence courses and the like. Instead they will tend to prefer the environment of an adult class which outwardly appears so much "safer" and less likely to make demands on them which they may be unable to meet. Nevertheless they are in fact *potentially* as capable of independent, self-directed study as anyone else. That is the faith of most adult educators, at any rate! And their professional concern is not just to provide opportunities for study for people who are already intellectually autonomous, but even more to enable those who are timid, passive or dependent to develop and exercise their latent ability to take charge of themselves and their learning. For this purpose, the traditional format of an adult class is usually the most practicable.

Besides it is a format which appears to deny student autonomy to a much greater extent than it necessarily does. Adult classes are regularly conducted in ways which in fact allow students a considerable measure of individual freedom. Much of what occurs in them is not really *class* activity at all. For instance it is regular practice in those which deal with practical skills (dressmaking, for example, or computing) for students to spend most of the time working on their own projects, with the teacher assisting them individually rather than attempting to teach the class as a whole. Admittedly they are learning together in a classroom, but the actual process of their learning may differ relatively little from that of an "independent learner" who has access to the guidance and advice of an expert – especially if they continue with their projects in between class meetings, as they very often do. This happens most commonly in courses dealing with practical skills, certainly, but it can and does take place also in courses on more academic subjects. Baum explains how study materials can be arranged in a series of packages or projects which students select and work at by themselves, and this technique is widely applicable.

A common variation on it is for the whole class to undertake a single project together. Probably the most celebrated instances of this approach are local history study groups, many of which research for years into the history of a particular area or institution and eventually produce a published account; but the same general method is sometimes employed in the social sciences (e.g. sociology and economics) as well as in art and music, where a group of students may mount their own "production". In projects like these the class often functions like a genuine study circle, everyone sharing their knowledge and their learning in order to carry out a common enterprise. If the teacher is careful to act as no more than a resource and support, leaving the overall direction and execution of the project in the students' own hands, it can demonstrate a very high degree of autonomy and self-management on their part.

Chapter 5

TEACHING FOR AUTONOMY

The previous chapter has suggested that the adult class, though appearing not to favour autonomy in learning, may nevertheless be conducted in such a way as to allow students a considerable measure of independence. It has argued also that although personal autonomy may be exercised to a greater extent in other forms of adult education it is probably developed more effectively in a traditional kind of instructional situation, since people who initially lack the confidence or ability to undertake the management of their own education are likely to find that a less threatening context in which to learn. This chapter carries the discussion further by considering in some detail how a class of adults should be taught so as to enhance their personal autonomy. It draws on current thinking among adult educators in order to provide a notional "blueprint" of how an adult class ought to be conducted. Later chapters will consider some of the obstacles which are likely to be encountered when this ideal is implemented in practice.

Enrolment

In this country compulsory education ends at the age of sixteen. Adults therefore come to classes more or less as volunteers, and often at a considerable expense of time, money and effort. The point is obvious and familiar but none the less important, as it is a permanent reminder that their very presence in the classroom is itself an exercise of personal autonomy. They are there because (to some degree) they choose to be, not just because someone else is forcing them to attend. In reality, of course, their choice is not always as full an expression of their autonomy as it might be. Experience suggests that people do not always choose to enrol for courses after considering the matter carefully but quite often do so "on the spur of the moment", perhaps just because of a sudden whim or because their friends are doing so. Sometimes they have only a vague or mistaken idea of what they are enrolling for,[12] and occasionally they appear to do so somewhat reluctantly – if it is what their employer demands, for instance, or if it is the only alternative to being idle at home. Still, the process of enrolment is potentially an important opportunity for students consciously to direct their own learning. As Paterson recommends (p193), they can decide to embark on a course of study as part of a long-term programme of self-development which they have devised for

themselves, very much in the manner of the serious "independent learner" described in chapter 4.

That is the ideal: how can it be realised? Evidently by ensuring as far as possible that students enrol only after due reflection and in full awareness of what they are doing. To that end, prospectuses need to be much more detailed than they often are, spelling out fully what each course aims at and what it has to offer; information ought to be provided about alternative courses as well (where they exist) so that the prospective student is aware of the range of choice available; and ideally, an educational counselling and advice service should be provided too, helping people to reflect not only about what course to enrol for but also about why to enrol for it and how it might fit in to an overall plan of personal development or advancement. Measures such as these are sometimes thought of as being outside the class teacher's sphere of operation, yet in fact they can contribute a great deal to his or her endeavours to promote students' autonomy.

Curriculum

What subjects of study should be offered to adults? Dearden (p72ff) argues that education for personal autonomy entails two main curriculum objectives: a working acquaintance with all the main academic disciplines, such as history, biology, literature and mathematics; and a good knowledge of one's own character, especially its main strengths and weaknesses. His reasoning is based on the fact that autonomy is manifested in and is enhanced through the exercise of choice, which, at its fullest, involves making decisions about ends as well as means, about what goals one should aim at and about how to achieve them (cf. chapter 2). As Kaufman argues (p48), in order to choose life goals sensibly one has to have a good understanding of oneself, especially one's own capabilities and needs; one also has to understand the world, in the sense of knowing what is feasible and how it can be attained. The first of these evidently amounts to self-knowledge, while the second, claims Dearden, is to be achieved by mastering the main subjects of academic study.

The argument is certainly a plausible one when related (as he intended it) to the learning needs of children, but whether it applies with equal force to adults is surely more doubtful. There is of course no reason why they should not study the major academic disciplines if they want to, and it may well be true, as Lawson also contends (p88), that by doing so they will enhance their "ability to choose when outside the educational situation". Nevertheless the blunt fact is that many of them have already made most of the major choices in life (of partner, career, belief system etc.). Many of them are middle-aged and some are quite elderly: they have usually chosen their main life goals many years previously, and are obviously in a very different situation from young people who still have those crucial decisions ahead of them. Undoubtedly some older students wish to study in order to illuminate such choices, but others are not to be criticised if they prefer to do so just as a hobby, leisure interest or diversion.

After all, that too is an exercise of their autonomy, and as such it has to be respected by the adult educator. For similar reasons one cannot presume that they are lacking in self-knowledge. If they were, it probably would enhance their autonomy to study the "humanities", like literature and history, as Paterson recommends (p142), for subjects such as these are generally reckoned by educationists to assist the development of insight, sensitivity and understanding (cf. Downey & Kelly p166ff). But in fact the vast majority of adults, including many of those who seem unwilling to take charge of their own education, amply display the degree of self-knowledge and self-criticism that is characteristic of mature people (cf. chapter 2).

Therefore one has to conclude that the actual choice of subjects offered to adults probably has less bearing on the development of their autonomy than on that of children and young people. What probably matters much more is the way in which the teacher frames their educational goals. Eisner (p352) has coined a useful and important distinction between "instructional" and "expressive" objectives. The former "specify what the student is to be able to do after he engages in an educational activity": they describe an accomplishment, such as performing a particular routine skillfully, answering certain questions correctly, and the like. In contrast the latter "identify the type of [educational] encounter he is to have". They specify the context or material for learning (a particular situation, say, or an experience) but do not attempt to dictate precisely what the student is to learn from it. Expressive objectives obviously allow far more room for individuality and autonomy and therefore they are generally more suited to adult education. Rather than trying to define in advance the goals of students' learning, a teacher can help them to develop the ability to direct their own studies by thinking of more "open-ended" educational experiences in which they can (within broad limits) determine for themselves what to learn.

Method

A teacher's desire to permit diversity and independence in learning may manifest itself also as an inclination to teach in one way rather than another. For instance a great many adult educators prefer to employ methods of tuition which include a substantial amount of class discussion. They argue that if several conflicting views or theories are being advanced and examined at the same time, different students can come to different conclusions as a result of the same educational experience: "what each member [of the class] takes away, what he learns from the situation, is uniquely personal" says Lawson (p23), and to that extent it may be counted an expression of his own autonomy.

But this line of reasoning is not entirely sound. For one thing it overlooks the obvious fact that many class discussions do not aim to allow people to take away something "uniquely personal". If a group of students is discussing the arrangements for their next field trip, or deliberating what topic in the subject

to tackle next, one hopes that they will arrive at a democratic decision which is accepted as impersonally binding on them all. Lawson's claim is true only of discussions which are *intended* to allow participants to learn different things – those which explore different interpretations of an issue, for example, or which review rival explanations. Even then, his observation is more a point about learning than about discussion, since at bottom *all* comprehension and intellectual mastery is "uniquely personal". To come to understand something which at first seemed unintelligible is essentially a matter of relating the unfamiliar to the familiar, of using what one knows already to explain or illuminate the apparent mystery. Since one's personal knowledge is necessarily the product of one's personal experience, as Elias & Merriam explain (p126ff), it follows that new material can only be linked to it in what is fundamentally a "personal" way. The sense one makes of something is one's own sense, or it is not really *sense* at all (cf Brookfield 1985 p22).

Therefore Lawson's remark is true of any method of teaching which produces genuine understanding. It applies equally to more formal presentation methods, for instance. Many teachers of adults seem to believe that they should not lecture to their students for the oft-quoted reason that "attempting to educate people by talking to them is like trying to fill a room full of narrow-necked bottles by throwing water over them." The analogy is an entertaining one but it is actually quite misleading, inasmuch as it suggests that students, like bottles , do no more than retain passively whatever they learn. In fact, to the extent that they understand what they hear in a lecture (and only to that extent are they likely to remember and "learn" it) they actively interpret and "make sense" of it – often with surprisingly "personal" results, as any lecturer can verify who looks at his or her students' notebooks. Indeed it is a fundamental weakness of presentation methods, compared with more interactive ways of teaching, that such misunderstandings usually cannot be corrected as they arise.

Democracy

The real reasons for preferring certain methods of teaching in adult education derive not so much from the psychology of learning as from the concept of adulthood itself. In chapter 2 this was shown to entail democracy. Our culture conceives adults as people who are essentially autonomous and self-directing, and therefore we believe that they have a fundamental right to participate in decisions which affect them. This principle has radical implications for the whole approach of adult education. It means that the teacher of an adult class is forbidden to treat students in an autocratic or dictatorial way, and must instead allow and assist them to participate fully in the management of their own education. By doing so he or she will enable them to experience fully what it means to direct themselves.

In practice they may be involved at several levels. For instance they may contribute to the overall planning of adult education provision. This happens

in the Workers' Educational Association (WEA), in which local groups of students choose the programme of courses to be offered and share substantially in the direction and policy-making of the whole organization. A number of Local Education Authorities likewise give their students a large say in the management of adult centres and colleges, though usually this stops short of outright control. There is even more scope for democratic participation in the management of classes. The teacher of a group of adults should not attempt to "control" them to the extent that is usually appropriate in dealing with children. Simply because they are adults they have the right to manage their own affairs (cf. chapter 2) and this necessarily limits the teacher's right to dominate or direct what they do. Consequently the conduct of the class ought to be a shared responsibility, with the teacher and students jointly deciding what to do next, ensuring that all can participate and controlling disruptive behaviour if it occurs. Whenever possible they should also determine democratically the syllabus to be studied.[14] Atter & Fox recommend a procedure whereby the teacher meets with potential students, discusses the proposed syllabus with them and then devises a course "tailored" to meet their expressed wishes. Probably this is not often adhered to in detail, but in less formal ways many teachers of adults regularly modify and adapt the content of their courses in response to their students' comments.

Equality

It is important to bear in mind that democratic control of an activity does not necessarily mean that the form of the activity will itself be democratic. What has been said in the foregoing paragraph does not rule out the possibility that a group of students may decide democratically that they want to be taught in an "undemocratic" way – by lectures, for instance, or similar non-participative methods. Indeed that probably happens quite often.[15] But chapter 2 showed that autonomy implies equality as well as democracy. As I have argued more fully elsewhere (Hostler 1981 p56), the ideal framework for adult education must therefore be one in which teachers and learners are equal. They must relate to each other as partners in a common enterprise of learning, working together to explore and master a chosen topic.

It is this principle, rather than the nature of learning, which serves to justify the popular doctrine that discussion and similar participative methods are most appropriate in adult education, for undoubtedly these can help to create a fundamental sense of partnership between the teacher and the students. But it must be borne in mind that often they are inappropriate for other reasons: for instance they presume that all the participants have some knowledge or opinion to contribute, which may not always be the case, especially at the beginning of a course; and in many of the more practical subjects, as well as in the "hard" sciences, there is generally very little to discuss. Rather than focusing on one particular method of teaching, therefore, it is safer to say that teachers of adults should exhibit a belief in the fundamental equality of themselves and their students in all their dealings with them. As explained in

chapter 2, what this really means is that the students should be treated as being equally important to the enterprise. For example their wishes and interests should carry as much weight as the teacher's (in devising the syllabus, say, or in deciding what to do next); one member of the class should have as much right to speak and be listened to as another, and the teacher should not assume privileges which are not directly justified by his or her position.

Objectives

In chapter 2 it was shown that this ideal of equality derives logically from the principle of respect for persons, which itself implies not merely a due regard for other people's beliefs and feelings but also, more fundamentally, an overriding concern for their personal autonomy. Within the context of an adult class this too has significant implications. For although (as argued above) no particular method of tuition or subject of study is necessitated by the students' adulthood, an overall educational objective undoubtedly is: viz., that the class should be conducted in such a way as to enhance the powers of self-management and self-direction of all its members.

Of course this broad, general aim has to be translated into more specific terms if it is to guide teachers in practice. A great many ways of enhancing personal autonomy obviously lie outside the proper range of their professional activities, being more in the nature of political and social reforms than *educational* methods as such.[16] As indicated earlier in this chapter, adult educators can and should ensure that democratic procedures are employed as far as possible in managing their classes and institutions, but beyond that most of them feel that their job is to enhance their students' autonomy by teaching rather than, say, by direct political action. Consequently they tend naturally to conceive personal autonomy in terms of what they can teach. For example they emphasise the relevance of practical skills which will help people cope with the problems and challenges of life. As mentioned earlier, they stress also the importance of intellectual understanding of the world, as gained through the mastery of academic knowledge. But their supreme, overall concern is with *thinking*. In chapter 1 it was shown that personal autonomy is essentially a matter of rational, deliberate action. However, as remarked in chapter 2, educationists generally pay rather more attention to the element of reasoning and deliberation in this process than they do to that of choice and action. It is as if they want to get students "thinking for themselves" because they trust that the "acting by themselves" will follow naturally.

Thus the chief general objective shared by most teachers of adults is to help students to become more independent intellectually. How should they go about it? In answering this question many of them have correctly observed that "thinking for oneself" is not the same as "being logical", since it is quite possible to draw conclusions logically from one's initial premises (and to act on them) while accepting those premises in a wholly uncritical and thoughtless

way. So earlier in this chapter the view was expressed that an autonomous person is one who not only pursues goals effectively but who also decides whether the goals are worth pursuing. Consequently much educational concern has come to focus on culturally prevailing values which tend to be accepted unthinkingly in the way sketched in chapter 2. As Barrow observes (p133), "although of course in practice they limit one's freedom of manoeuvre, [they] do not curb one's autonomy so long as they themselves are open to question. They do curb one's autonomy when they become unalterable factors determining one's behaviour". Various teaching strategies are commonly recommended as a means of helping adult students to be more conscious and critical of these beliefs. One which has been noted already is to encourage (by various means) the acquisition of self-knowledge, since in the course of developing an understanding of oneself one usually becomes aware of one's deepest assumptions and values, and that is evidently the first step towards criticising them. Another way is to help people realise that many others share these assumptions too, which are inherent in our surrounding culture. This is to promote what Brookfield (1985 p30) calls "an appreciation of the contextuality of knowledge and an awareness of the culturally constructed form of value frameworks" which, he maintains, should be a major objective in all adult education. A third approach is to assist students to criticise their culture and to examine possible alternatives to it. Kaufman (p53) likewise argues that this is an especially appropriate aim for adult classes. He contends that schooling in early life is mainly a process of socialisation and acculturation, and that in order to combat its effect and thus enhance individual autonomy, later forms of education "must systematically encourage challenge to traditional forms of activity". To do this, of course, is a large part of what is commonly referred to as teaching "critical thinking". It involves helping students to develop the habits of questioning what they are taught, of seeking out and evaluating the grounds for its truth, of looking for alternative explanations and theories, and so on. As mentioned earlier in chapter 2, many theorists regard this as the very essence of education in contrast to indoctrination.

It will be evident that objectives such as these, though described here in rather broad, theoretical terms, carry a host of implications for the everyday practice of adult education. For example, the teacher who seeks to develop students' autonomy cannot be content just to initiate them into a body of knowledge, however important or interesting it may be. He or she must also encourage them to reflect on its epistemological status: how certain is it? what are the grounds for accepting it? are there alternative explanations? At the end they should be able to "stand back" and assess the truth and significance of what they have learned. It is in this sense, of course, that their thinking should be "critical" - not in the sense of being just a negative challenge. And it is for this purpose that active learning methods are usually most appropriate, since they require students not just to listen passively but also to exercise their skills of reasoning and judgment, especially in the context of a discussion or debate in

which different views are compared. Nevertheless, what is important here is the objective rather than the method.

Evaluation

Since students are to reflect critically on what they learn it is fitting to conclude this chapter by considering the evaluation and assessment of learning in adult classes. How can this be conducted so as to acknowledge and develop the personal autonomy of students? In the light of what has been said so far it must evidently be carried out by means of democratic procedures which reflect the presumed equality of teacher and taught. As the WEA recommends (p11), students "should be involved also in evaluating the work of the class and what they achieve as individuals".

How they should be involved is a more complex question, the answer to which depends on many factors. In classes which are aiming at qualifications (such as those awarded by the City & Guilds Institute, the schools' Examination Boards and the like) the ultimate evaluation is necessarily conducted by others, since the majority of students take such courses at least partly because they want their eventual level of achievement to be judged and certified officially. Even in courses which do not lead to qualifications they may wish the teacher to assess their work. This is not necessarily a denial or erosion of their autonomy, for knowing how they "rate" in the eyes of an expert may well play an important part in developing their knowledge of their own capabilities and hence in giving their assessment of themselves an objective foundation. But while the teacher should not necessarily withold his evaluation when it is requested, he should obviously encourage students also to formulate their own assessment of their progress. The magnitude of an achievement depends entirely on the standard by which it is judged, and what seems to be a very modest performance to others may look like a major triumph in the light of the performer's own abilities, problems or previous attainments. So even if students are not doing very well by the examiner's standard they may be progressing admirably by their own, and in the long run it may be much more important for them to realise that than to gain a formal qualification. In classes which are not externally examined self-assessment becomes even more significant, and should be conducted in a way that emphasises personal autonomy. For instance the class as a whole should monitor its progress in the subject, perhaps by reference to a syllabus which has been previously discussed and agreed in the manner suggested above. Individuals, equally, should be encouraged to reflect on how well they are doing – what problems are they encountering? what topics have they mastered? where do they want to go next? Developing the habit of evaluating and monitoring one's own learning in this way is a great step on the road to becoming a more independent learner.

Chapter 6

SOME PRACTICAL PROBLEMS

The previous chapter has offered a brief sketch of how adults should be taught in a class so as to enhance their personal autonomy. In effect it has applied to that particular educational situation the broad principles of individual choice, democratic control, rationality and respect for persons which were shown in chapter 2 to be so closely related to the central notion of autonomy. Undoubtedly a process of education which embodies these principles in a realistic way *can* help adults to become more self-directing and more self-determining both in their thinking and in their behaviour. Most adult educators can cite from their own experience "success stories" of people who were passive, dependent and wanting to be led when they first enrolled for classes, but who gradually blossomed into confident, autonomous students, willing and able to plan and execute their own programme of education. Yet at the same time it has to be admitted that there are many other students who do not appear to develop in this way, some of them despite attending adult classes regularly for years. This chapter looks at some possible reasons for these "failures" and the next discusses some additional ways of helping them.

Teachers

One probable reason why some students do not become more autonomous is simply that their teachers do not really want them to. This is a claim I cannot substantiate with hard evidence: it is merely an impression gained from my involvement in staff development work with teachers of adults, and one which is shared, so far as I can tell, by some others involved in it too. Certainly all would acknowledge that there is a small minority of teachers who openly deny any concern with their students' autonomy. They take the view that their job is solely to give a series of good lectures on their subject, or to get their students through an examination, or to "give them what they want"; they maintain that it is not their business to try and promote their students' personal growth and self-determination. However there seem also to be a great many more who gladly accept the *idea* of student autonomy and who declare their belief in it while they are taking part in staff development courses and the like, but to someone observing their teaching they appear rather unwilling to conduct their lessons in practice in the manner sketched in chapter 5.

From watching some of them teach and from discussing the issue with them I

have come to the conclusion that their reluctance to do this probably has two main causes. One is inertia or fatigue. Teaching demands much less effort (of a certain kind) when students are passive. An experienced teacher, at least, usually finds it a fairly easy task just to give a talk on a subject which he or she "knows backwards" or to take a compliant group of students through an exercise which has worked successfully many times before. It is much harder to teach students who are really thinking for themselves, who have been challenged or stimulated into independent thought and activity. The main reason is that when they are more autonomous their reactions and responses are more original and creative, as Downie, Loudfoot & Telfer point out (p65). They then ask unexpected questions, they try out their own ideas and contribute in unpredictable ways; and the teacher accordingly has to be much more "on his toes", ready to respond to unusual observations, to answer new questions or problems and to help evaluate inventive techniques. Evidently that all demands much more energy and attention than the sleepy repetition of a well-worn routine. Of course most teachers of adults find that it is also far more rewarding to teach students who display their autonomy in ways like these. But if they are honest they will admit that it is more tiring too, and given that many of them are expected to do it at the end of a full day's work, for relatively low pay and minimal professional recognition, one cannot be surprised if they do not always exert themselves as much as perhaps they should.

Another factor affecting them (usually less consciously) may be insecurity and defensiveness. If students are really thinking for themselves and are developing their own ideas and goals they are bound to challenge the teacher now and again. They are not very likely to restrict themselves to asking polite questions for clarification or further exposition: they will also want to question the teacher's interpretation or approach, to demand that alternative views or techniques be considered and tried, perhaps even to query the value of the whole course or subject. This kind of challenge is potentially very stimulating to the teacher but it can also seem rather threatening. When I was a young and rather inexperienced WEA tutor a singularly autonomous class of mine suddenly decided that they wanted to abandon the subject I had planned and had carefully prepared, and asked instead to study another topic about which I knew very little. My reaction was very defensive, I fear, and no doubt was educationally wrong, but it was surely very natural. Many other teachers similarly want to remain on the safe ground of subjects they know well, and that may make them wish to keep their students there as well.

Factors like these mean that many teachers of adults are actually less willing to encourage their students' autonomy in practice than they profess to be. This alone can suffice to prevent it from developing. Adult students are generally shrewd enough to realise when a teacher does not really mean what he or she says, when his or her "heart isn't in it", and if they are not already fairly confident and autonomous they will tend to be deterred from demanding a

style of teaching which makes them think and act for themselves, simply by perceiving that their teacher is reluctant to provide it.

Institutions

The institutions, organisations and agencies within which adults are educated may also discourage the development of individual autonomy. For instance it has been noted already in chapter 4 that well-established regulations and divisions can effectively prevent desirable educational activities from taking place. At a deeper level there often seems to be some reluctance on the part of those who manage the institutions to allow adult students to direct their own education. This may be unfortunate but it is not always unreasonable, for if students *are* allowed to do so there is no guarantee that they will do it in a way that the professional educators believe to be right.

This is a genuine risk which is sometimes glossed over in debates about the subject. In chapter 2 it was shown that personal autonomy is logically associated with many other things which are generally considered good and desirable. These associations have given autonomy much of its popular reputation for being "a good thing", for as chapter 3 demonstrated the usual reasons for that belief are not necessarily conclusive. In this respect the association of autonomy with the exercise of reason is especially important. In everyday usage "autonomy" has a distinctly "normative" sense, for it means not merely that the self obeys its own laws but that "the *rational* self sets or accepts for itself the *rational* law", as Gewirth puts it (p41, my emphasis). As shown in chapter 2, an autonomous person is commonly thought of as being "adult" or "mature" and this is usually taken to imply that they should be sensible and rational (in contrast to children, who are expected to be wayward and silly). Now in this sense "rational" is clearly being used to imply rather more than the minimal use of reason sketched in chapter 2, which amounted merely to self-awareness, foresight and commonsense. As Kaufman explains (p49), it is being used also with a tacit reference to accepted beliefs and practices, for the idea of being "rational" in this normative sense includes the notion of being "normal" as well, i.e., thinking and behaving in ways which other people accept as reasonable, sensible or right. As McDermott demonstrates (p123ff.), theorists who advocate the development of personal autonomy very often (unconsciously?) employ this prescriptive meaning, for although they talk only of helping people to direct their own lives, they usually assume that the people who are helped will direct their lives in ways which are generally considered acceptable.

But of course the idea of autonomy cannot legitimately be restricted in this way. The right to direct oneself includes the right to be "wrong" and in practice autonomous people can and do direct themselves in ways that others believe to be undesirable or mistaken. This is why institutions which seek to educate adults may be right not to grant their students outright control. After all they are in the business of providing *education* and that task rules out many

activities which students might well prefer to undertake – for there is often a desire to use adult classes for non-educational purposes, as I have shown more fully elsewhere (Hostler 1981 p3ff.). Besides, within the broad field of education each institution usually has its own more narrowly defined "patch" which may limit its range of permissible activities even more. Chadwick & Legge (p4) cite the example of a WEA course on antiques which attracted a large and enthusiastic class of professional antique dealers, which was cancelled because of a conviction among the WEA's staff that the organisation should be devoting its energies instead to educating people who were less knowledgeable and perhaps also less able. Surely this kind of restriction on the (negative) liberty of students to do what they want is not always unjustifiable. But although adult educators may sometimes be right in wanting to retain control over their activities, it has to be recognised that this necessarily limits the development and exercise of their students' autonomy.

Students

However, "external" restrictions and disincentives such as these are probably only partly to blame, for quite often it seems that adult students themselves do not really want to become more autonomous. Perhaps unconsciously, some of them apparently prefer to remain passive and dependent. One reason for this attitude which is often mentioned is the effect of previous conditioning. A great many of them, especially those new to adult classes, have had no previous experience of formal education apart from their early years in school. Since the schools have only recently begun to try and foster their pupils' autonomy (Dearden p59) many older people have encountered only the most traditional methods of teaching before. Often they come to an adult class with habits and expectations carried over from that kind of experience. A trivial illustration is provided by one of my middle-aged students who always puts up his hand when he wants to speak in the classroom – but not, I notice, when he joins in a discussion over coffee afterwards! More significantly, adult students often have very definite ideas (though usually unconscious ones) about how the teacher should behave and how they should respond. For example they often seem to be disconcerted and sometimes mildly upset if their tutor does not "teach" (i.e. lecture) and sets them instead to work at participative discovery exercises. With this common presumption that the teacher will be clearly *in* authority, directing and controlling what they do, there is often an accompanying expectation that he will be *an* authority, that he "knows all the answers" and is there to expound a definitive body of knowledge or to instruct them in the proper, correct technique.[17] Up to a point, of course, this attitude is quite right: the teacher usually does know more about most of the topics than they do, at any rate, and in a great many courses their role is at least partly to assimilate material presented to them. But in the previous chapter it was noted that every body of knowledge is culturally determined and includes a number of unresolved issues and alternative theories or methods. There are always "loose ends" which students with expectations such as these will probably find it rather hard to accept.

Besides their early conditioning, another reason for this kind of difficulty may be their individual "learning style". Though still in the process of definition, in recent years this notion has emerged from research which indicates that people with different types of personality tend to have a bias to learn in one way rather than another. For instance there is the "syllabus bound" type of student who always wants to stick to the defined task and is unwilling to pursue interesting and important digressions, or the "serialist" who prefers a logical, step-by-step progression through the subject rather than a broad but sketchy overview of the whole (cf. Lovell p105ff.). Dispositions such as these can combine with other factors to make students (and teachers) appear intellectually timid, anxious to have everything planned in advance and to proceed cautiously. This kind of attitude is not incompatible with personal autonomy (one can be self-directing in a cautious way) but it can hinder the development of a more obvious and assertive style of self-management.[18]

It may well be the case also that adult students are deterred from developing towards this goal by certain aspects of autonomy itself. It was noted in chapter 3 that although the exercise of self-determination can be pleasant it does carry with it a number of drawbacks, chief among which is the inescapable assumption of responsibility. Probably many people do not want to be fully autonomous for the simple reason that often they would rather sit back and let someone else make the decisions or take the initiative. One can see this quite often in the behaviour of adult students. For example, consider how they sometimes grumble about their courses: they are going too slowly, they say, or their teacher is unclear, or the facilities are inadequate. Complaints like these are frequently justified, I am sure; but what is worth remarking in the present context is that even when the remedy lies largely in their own hands they may be unwilling to employ it. A typical illustration is provided by a group who complained to me recently that one member of their class always talked too much in discussion and that their tutor was not doing enough to stop her. As argued in the previous chapter, it should not in fact be the teacher's sole responsibility to manage students' behaviour in an adult class, since their very adulthood bestows on them the right to direct and control themselves; so I explained to them that the problem was largely theirs to solve and suggested that the offender would probably shut up if they started butting in, rather than listening to her deferentially as they were doing. But they were surprised and slightly upset at this. Talking to them further I found that fundamentally they did not want to share the responsibility of managing the behaviour of the class, which they thought should be the teacher's job alone. In ways like this adult students are quite often reluctant to undertake responsibilities, even though that is the price they have to pay for being treated like autonomous individuals.

Like their teachers (see above) they can also be affected by indolence or fatigue. "Thinking for yourself", which was shown in the previous chapter to be the very essence of personal autonomy in adult education, can be very hard

work. Really to grapple with a problem until it is solved; to puzzle out the sense of a confusing subject; to devise and refine a new technique; to plan a project and carry it through: tasks like these all demand much more effort from the learner than being "spoon fed" with carefully prepared material. Of course they also bring greater rewards, such as the thrill of genuine discovery and pride in one's own achievement, but undeniably they are attended too by much greater risks of failure and frustration. Alas, the process of learning is not a continual delight: if it were there would be little need for teachers! From time to time every student feels baffled or bored or helpless or despondent, and at such moments it is much easier to turn to a teacher for help than to exert oneself to overcome the problem. So people can also be deterred from becoming more independent in thought and learning by the sheer effort involved in doing so.

Symptoms

Thus there are many factors potentially at work to discourage students and teachers from developing individual autonomy. Inevitably they manifest themselves in a variety of ways which are often subtle and unobtrusive. For example the syllabus of a course, even if devised jointly by teacher and students (cf. chapter 5), may be rather "tame", following safe and well-travelled paths rather than venturing into areas of dispute or uncertainty. The teaching method too may be rather undemanding, being predominantly a matter of exposition by the teacher with a few questions from the students, even in topics where a more participative and challenging method could be used. Even class discussion can easily fail to provoke independent and critical thought: for instance it can be persistently superficial, merely an exchange of "off-the-cuff", uninformed and unconsidered opinions which does not (or is not made to) probe the subject or wrestle with the problem; or it can become a familiar ritual which always ends in everyone agreeing with the teacher's view and accepting what he or she offers as "the right answer". Likewise in projects and in practical work students may be (tacitly) confined to tasks which the teacher has planned for in advance, and they can all too easily be helped in a way which saps their initiative and diminishes their autonomy rather than sometimes being left a bit to work out their own answers or solutions. Democratic procedures also can be something of a sham. Often they amount to no more than a cursory "majority vote" rather than a genuine attempt to ensure that the wishes of all are heard and are taken into account, and frequently they are implemented as a fundamentally paternalistic exercise of consulting students "only insofar as it is thought good for them by the teachers", as Downie, Loudfoot & Telfer remark (p115).

As I have shown more fully elsewhere (Hostler 1982), all these evasions of autonomy (and there are many more) may be encouraged actively and reinforced by the students themselves. As indicated in the present chapter they may have good reasons for not wanting to take charge of their own learning and these can induce them (perhaps unconsciously) to collude with a teacher

who is secretly unwilling for them to do so. The result may be an educational activity which professes to aim at developing students' autonomy and which appears to do so to the casual observer and to the participants, but which actually allows or encourages them to remain contentedly passive and dependent.

Chapter 7

SOME POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

The aim of this final chapter is to suggest some ways of overcoming the kinds of resistance to the development of individual autonomy that have been outlined in chapter 6. To do so, however, is evidently to beg the fundamental question of whether they ought to be overcome. If adult students want to remain passive and dependent should they not be allowed to do so? Does not a belief in their personal autonomy, their right to direct themselves, entail granting them also the right *not* to be autonomous?

This question raises the classic issue of paternalism: when if ever is it legitimate to interfere with someone else's life for their own good? Downie, Loudfoot & Telfer (p111) summarise the view of many theorists when they say that paternalism is only permissible in the practice of education if (a) the teacher knows better than the pupil what is in the pupil's own interest and (b) the pupil is not fully autonomous, either because he does not yet possess the right of self-direction or because it is temporarily overridden by other considerations. Now it is evident that these conditions are seldom if ever satisfied in adult education. One cannot plausibly maintain (a) that the teacher of adults *knows* that it is really in the best interests of his or her students to become more autonomous. It was shown in chapter 3 that the value of autonomy, though generally taken for granted, is actually somewhat questionable, and one suspects that comparatively few teachers have thought through the issue enough to be rationally and justifiably certain that it is always best for people to become more independent.[19] And condition (b), of course, is scarcely ever met. As demonstrated in chapter 2, acknowledging that a student is an adult means at least according him all the moral and legal rights of adults, among which is what Downie, Loudfoot & Telfer (loc.cit.) call "a basic right as a human being to make his own mistakes and decide things for himself". As they rightly conclude, it follows that a teacher can never be justified by paternalistic reasons in compelling adults (and often not young people either) to do what he or she thinks would be best for them.

But of course there is very little scope for compulsion in adult education anyhow. Attendance is essentially voluntary, as remarked in chapter 5, and the means of punishment or coercion generally do not exist,[20] so that a teacher of adults simply is not in a position to *force* students even if it were legitimate

to do so. All that he or she can do is to try and get them to become more autonomous by involving them in a process of learning, by challenging them to think for themselves, "pushing" them to grapple with problems, and so on. This kind of educational pressure does not contradict their fundamental right to independence and self-determination. As McDermott points out (p135, summarising J S Mill),"holding a definite view on how another [person] should behave and trying to persuade him to behave accordingly" does not conflict with a belief in his personal autonomy. It does not deny his right to direct himself: it merely seeks to influence the way in which he does so.

But McDermott goes on to remark that such "zealous do-goodism" (as he terms it) is likely to be resented as unwarranted meddling or interference, and it may come close to denying the other person's right to privacy if not their autonomy. This is surely a warning which adult educators must heed. As Lawson observes (p14), all education is by its very nature a deliberate attempt to change other people. No teacher can claim to have done his or her job if at the end of the educational experience the students remain exactly as they were at the beginning – still less, of course, if they end up somehow worse than when they started. "Success" in education necessarily has to be conceived as involving some kind of improvement, progress, development or growth – though *what* kind is obviously another large and very fundamental question.[21] However the teacher's desire to bring this about may very well be perceived by the students as a threat. They may not want to develop; as indicated in chapter 6, they may not want to become more independent and self-determining. They may have enrolled on a course just to master a particular subject or to get a necessary qualification, or perhaps just for recreation or companionship (as Ghazzali shows), and if so they may be inclined to resent the teacher's efforts to make them become more independent people.

This kind of defensiveness is all the more likely because personal development is always an uncomfortable and unsettling process. Elsewhere (Hostler 1981 p42ff.) I have explained more fully how it necessarily involves "breaking the mould" of one's present self and how this always leads to a whole series of personal upheavals. Teachers need to bear in mind constantly that a major revolution has to take place if a dependent adult is to become autonomous. For that to happen there will have to be radical changes in all areas of that person's life, and especially in their personal relationships which will be altered profoundly and in some cases may even be disrupted by the fundamental alteration taking place within themselves. There is ample evidence to show that the friends and family of an adult student often oppose his learning, and it is reasonable to suppose that they do so partly because they realise that there is a danger of their relationship with him changing or breaking down (cf. Hostler loc.cit.) An important consequence of this kind of opposition is that personal relationships within an adult class can come to be extremely significant from an educational point of view, since people who are not already autonomous and independent are unlikely to become so unless

they feel that they are learning in an environment where the process of personal change and its results will be accepted.

Therefore the first requirement for a teacher seeking to promote the development of personal autonomy in such individuals is to be aware that they themselves may perceive the enterprise as one that is potentially uncomfortable and isolating. The teacher must be ready not only to challenge and to provoke them intellectually but also to provide them with sympathetic emotional support. In part this may be done simply by showing and assuring them that personal development is normal and right, but usually it is important also to encourage the growth of strong and supportive relationships between students themselves. The teacher should make it a conscious aim to help them to get to know each other well and by one means or another to create an atmosphere in which they feel able to talk over their worries and frustrations and to help each other resolve their problems. This may not seem much like "teaching" them but it is often a vitally important part of enabling them to become more autonomous.

At a more academic level the teacher should also consider how best to provide them with additional educational help. For instance it may be important to boost their confidence about learning, for diffidence and fear of failure will tend to reinforce an underlying attitude of dependence. In constructing the syllabus therefore the teacher should try to sequence the learning tasks so as to ensure that students cannot fail at the very beginning of the course – and indeed, that they will go on from success to success – for thus they will discover that learning can be a real source of delight and self-esteem instead of the threat it might otherwise appear. For the same reason it may be worthwhile to devote a part of the course to teaching the basic study skills needed to master the subject. Intellectual autonomy involves more than just *thinking* for yourself, important as that is: it includes also working by yourself, planning your studies, carrying out your project or your programme of research. Many adult students have never learnt (or been taught) how to learn and they often readily confess that this makes them feel inadequate and helpless. Experience suggests that some guidance and practice in planning a study schedule, taking notes, revising, sitting exams and the like can go a long way towards helping them to become less dependent and more willing to undertake the management of their own learning.

Another technique advocated by Knowles (1975 p26ff.) is to draw up a "learning contract", by which he means a formal statement of the desired goals of learning and of the steps required to attain them. He recommends this as the basis for a more individualised style of learning which in fact emulates that of the "independent learner" described in chapter 4; but as noted there, this is probably beyond the immediate reach of many less autonomous students. In a "watered down" form, however, some kind of learning contract can often be incorporated in the arrangements for an adult class. For example

it is clearly embodied to some extent in the process of negotiating and agreeing the syllabus between the teacher and the students, which was recommended in chapter 5. And sometimes it can be included even in a more rigidly prescribed course of study. For instance a colleague of mine interviews each student when they enrol to make sure that they understand fully what the course involves and that they have made sensible arrangements to cope with the workload; these plans are then enshrined in a written "agreement" which is used as the basis for reviewing their progress from time to time. He reports that this procedure tends to make them more consciously committed to the course and more aware of the significance of their own role in planning and evaluating their work.

Knowles (op.cit. p34) envisages the learning contract operating in such a way that the teacher functions "primarily as a procedural guide and only secondarily as a resource for content information". The emphasis throughout is to be on the student conducting his or her own study project, with the teacher merely helping to formulate objectives, to forewarn of problems and generally to encourage progress. Obviously it is appropriate for a teacher to restrict himself to this role of a "facilitator" when dealing with students who are already fairly autonomous but usually rather more is required when teaching people who are positively unwilling to assume control of their own learning. With passive and dependent students the teacher has to be more challenging and provoking in order to overcome their disinclination to develop. For instance he or she may deliberately introduce problems and difficulties, presenting the subject less as a body of knowledge to be absorbed than as a series of conundrums or puzzles to be solved. Or he may intentionally fail to warn students of problems which lie ahead, allowing them to get into difficulties which can then be used as "leverage" to involve them in discovering their own solutions.

Undoubtedly measures and techniques like these can help but ultimately it has to be admitted that they cannot guarantee success. Despite all the teacher's efforts some adult students will probably remain rather dependent and passive both in their learning and in their more general behaviour. The reason for these obstinate "failures" is not necessarily that the teacher lacks professional skill, still less that he or she is not sufficiently committed to developing personal autonomy, for as noted at the beginning of this monograph the vast majority of adult educators do in fact regard that as a major objective in their work. The fundamental reason why they do not achieve it more often is simply that in the final analysis it is the students' own task. Strictly speaking, "develop" is only an intransitive verb: it is essentially something that people do, not something that is done to them. Personal growth can never be *made* to occur, especially not in students who are basically volunteers. This is partly because the teacher is only one among a vast multitude of influences affecting them and partly because of his own commitment to their autonomy and to education itself (rather than indoctrination), for this prevents him from going

beyond a certain point in trying to make them change. Consequently they themselves must evince a fundamental willingness to develop, a readiness to grow and to accept both the privileges and the responsibilities of being mature, adult students. The teacher may employ all the means at his or her disposal to stimulate, guide, encourage and support their development, but like any other achievement in learning, the actual development of their personal autonomy will in the end be something which they themselves have accomplished.

NOTES

1. Perhaps there is an odd sense in which a robot could be said to be "autonomous", in that it acts of its own accord; but it would be more normal to describe this behaviour as "automatic". "Autonomy" implies not only acting without hindrance but also choosing freely how to act, as will be made clear later.

2. As McCloskey points out, however, it can be simplistic to consider only these two. He identifies two subsidiary senses of negative freedom and four of positive, and shows that all are practically relevant in social work. A similarly complex analysis might be useful in the theory of adult education.

3. This would be denied by Plant (p26ff.) and by McDermott (p128), both of whom identify "self-determination" with negative freedom alone. But both explicitly include the notion of rational self-control in the idea of self-determination, although McCloskey (p174), for instance, includes it as part of positive liberty. In other words this is an area in which terminological differences abound! Nevertheless all theorists seem to agree that autonomy requires rational self-direction.

4. Sartre (p488) brings out very well the way in which encountering something as an obstacle can reveal to me the plans which are thus being obstructed. For instance if I find myself getting irritated at the apparent slowness of other drivers I may only then realise how much I am in a hurry myself.

5. On the other hand, as Williams shows, there *are* certain characteristics in which we are more or less equal – in having certain basic physical and psychological needs, for instance – and this kind of similarity is an important element in the notion that people are equal.

6. As Plant demonstrates (p29), these two issues are regularly confused by social workers who are unwilling to grant self-determination to clients who will not accept the responsibilities which it is felt they should undertake. There is a risk of this also in adult education – see chapter 6.

7. For example, Kaufman points out (p50) that Kant's ideal of autonomous behaviour is essentially *in*authentic, in contrast to the view taken in chapter 1. Like many Christian moralists Kant thought that the "self" was essentially depraved, and had to be transcended by reason in order to achieve moral virtue.

8. But as McCloskey points out (p170), in asserting this Mill interprets autonomy in its most favourable sense: he does not seriously consider that people might "misuse" their powers of self-direction in ways that he would deprecate. This point is relevant to adult education - see chapters 6 and 7.

9. Officially, "the leader of a study circle is not expected to function as a teacher" (Brevskolan p2); but in fact he or she often does so, working through the study material beforehand, presenting it to the group, guiding the discussion and so on (Jones p18ff). So in fact many study circles operate in practice like the traditional adult classes discussed later.

10. Sometimes the student is allowed to choose between "options", of course, but usually the content of these is largely predetermined.

11. This is the vocabulary used throughout the DES Memorandum and in subsequent letters to Responsible Bodies concerning grant aid.

12. In evaluating my own teaching, for instance, I ask students to state (among other things) what they hoped to learn from the course. The answers show that often they expect something which bears little relation to what I intend to teach them or to the purpose of the course as advertised.

13. The quotation is attributed to Dean Inge, but I have been unable to trace the precise reference.

14. Obviously this cannot be done when the syllabus is not of the tutor's own devising, as is often the case when the course leads to a qualification.

15. An example from my student days: we (the student body) demanded an opportunity to study a topic not included in the syllabus; the staff responded with the offer of a series of seminars, which would have required a lot of work from us; we declined their offer, saying that if we could not have lectures, we did not want to study it. (So much for our desire to learn!)

16. Radical educationists, of course, attack this distinction as meaningless, and claim that education must involve political action to increase the (negative) freedom of students.

17. Significantly, this is very much the kind of expectation that Perry found among school leavers. He diagnosed it as part of a more general intellectual immaturity. As remarked in chapter 2, maturity is not always correlated with age.

18. Here is another reason for being wary of simple prescriptions regarding teaching method. To be effective the method must be acceptable to the student, and must therefore match his or her preferred style of learning.

19. This is not to accuse them of stupidity or indolence. It really is a very difficult problem. How is "best" to be understood, for example? If autonomy is claimed to be self-evidently an intrinsic good, as discussed in chapter 3, then the problem is solved; but most would feel that that is a rather arbitrary solution; and if that is rejected, some other standard of value has to be chosen and autonomy shown to contribute to it.

20. In certain courses, admittedly, the teacher can make a report to the student's employer or sponsor, and this may serve as an indirect means of discipline.

21. I have reviewed most popular candidates elsewhere (Hostler 1981).

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